DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 445 CG 009 502

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TITLE Women In Rural China--Work Patterns and Fertility Goals.
PUB DATE Aug 74
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (82nd, New Orleans, Louisiana, August 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese Culture; *Family Planning; Females; Non Western Civilization; *Population Trends; Research Projects; Rural Population; *Sex Role; Social Change; Speeches; *Working Women

ABSTRACT

The great institutional changes in Chinese agriculture over the past 25 years have altered the position of women in the economy and family, one consequence of which has been the emergence of female role models who delay marriage and bear small families. This paper discusses the fertility goals of the rural activist women as one type of response to organizational and cultural change in Chinese society. The report begins with a discussion of the institutional features associated with the historical incidence of large families in the Asian agricultural setting. A description follows of the recent changes that have occurred in Asian urban centers, including: (1) the relation of the family to the economy; (2) the reorganization of housework; (3) the assimilation of women into male roles; (4) the educational advancement of Chinese women; (5) the unevenness of change; and (6) the motivation to limit family size. The paper concludes with some implications for further research. (Author/BW)

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WOMEN IN RURAL CHINA - WORK PATTERNS AND FERTILITY GOALS

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The great institutional changes in Chinese agriculture over the past twenty-five years has altered the position of women in the economy and family, one of the consequences of which has been the emergence of female role models who delay marriage and bear small families. This paper will discuss the fertility goals of the rural activist women as one type of response to organizational and cultural changes in Chinese society.

Women living and working in the Asian agricultural setting, such as China through the 1950's, have borne sizeable families because agriculture has been associated with the following institutional features:

1) family control over production. In China through 1950 property and skills were inherited by family members, all of whom could work productively in agriculture and related tasks. Until relatively recently mortality was high in the developing nations (and infant mortality remains high in many areas), so that women had to bear numerous children to ensure some survived, and families were not necessarily large.[1] But even so, large families were useful on the farm, for after entering the labor force, the older children provided the income to rear the younger ones.

2) the work setting that did not interfere with bearing and raising children. Women's work was "replaceable work"[2]; their agricultural skills were easily learned by others, their jobs were repetitive, and required little individual decision making. Lacking commitment to the specific job or to their workmates, when they were pregnant, postpartum and lactating, or when family tasks were heavy, women easily left their jobs. Furthermore, they frequently performed agricultural jobs in their spare time (such as seed selection), with a baby on their back (weeding vegetables), or with their babies watched by older children or relatives (when transplanting rice, harvesting, and winnowing grain).

3) the strict division of labor by age and sex which kept men and women in their accepted roles. Women did not aspire to men's agricultural tasks nor to their role as community representatives.

4) low educational levels and an economy without rapidly changing tastes. The agricultural setting lacked higher educational facilities and young women had access neither to the formal educational system nor to egalitarian ideals education might have conveyed, both factors having motivated urban women to reduce their fertility below rural levels.[3] In the rural areas social placement occurred through family connections, rather than the educational system, hence parents were not greatly concerned to save money for education. Consumer goods aspirations and tastes changed relatively slowly from one year to another, although money was saved up for family feasts.

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5) patrilineal lineage membership. Women were not members of their father's surname group, and exogamous residence patterns were mandatory (in other words, they married into a village other than that in which they grew up). Patrilocal marriage in itself was a strong pronatalist pressure. On entering a strange village, women gained acceptance into their husband's family by bearing children, especially sons, to further the family line.

6) a social structure that firmly supported pro-natalist attitudes. Women lacked the conviction that they should limit fertility, and did not have the contraceptive means to do so. Their main goal was to bear numerous sons and daughters who were competent enough to maintain the family position, if not to enrich it, and to care for them in their old age.

Many of these features have undergone change in urban centers in Asia, but since three-quarters of China's populace live in rural areas, we can legitimately question whether such pro-natalist features can be weakened in the village setting. One model area, a seedbed of change, has been selected for disucssion: the Ta-chai (pronounced da-jai) production brigade, a north China agricultural unit which has been widely publicized because of its style of labor power recruitment and organization.[4] Located in a poor mountainous area, Ta-chai has suffered recurrent natural disasters which have ruined its harvests and destroyed its buildings, and it has worked out organizational techniques to motivate the populace to regain and raise production levels.

1) One of the first changes was in the relation of the family to the economy. As in the rest of China, land used for production of crops for the market has been collectivized and is now owned by the commune; most machinery is owned and operated by the brigade (several brigades in one commune) and the brigade deploys labor. Although labor mobilization has long been taken out of the hands of the family, such administrative changes created the conditions for, but did not guarantee, that more of the populace would work in production. Surveys of the late 1950's found that in North West China women were 40% of the labor force, but most worked fifty days or less a year, and women accounted for only one-quarter of all the days worked.[5] It has been Ta-chai's goal to increase women's work participation. In 1963, after a particularly bad flood, young unmarried women were organized into work units, working "side by side" with the men they repaired damaged terraced fields. Called "iron sides girls", this shock brigade of unmarried women aged 17 to 23, later joined by a sister group of married members of the Women's Association, has become an archetype of activist women. They obtained permission to learn farming skills usually taught to men, and qualified for heavy farming tasks. They are high output workers, and in 1965 these women worked 234 labor days (36 above the average of other Ta-chai women, and well above the average of women in North China); they further set a goal for themselves to work 320 days a year, or close to the 330 labor days performed by men.

2) To facilitate their work, housework has been reorganized and production mechanized. Hand tractors, one-person 5 horse-power tractors, husking apparatuses, flour-grinding machinery and so on, have simplified agricultural and home production. Collective sewing and tailoring and public canteens provide alternatives to housework. But despite these organizational features, most farm and household tasks remain arduous and labor consuming, and childcare facilities are rudimentary. Those women that choose to work in the heavy

labor sector alongside the men undergo particularly strenuous work: they cannot move rocks with babies on their backs, nor can postpartum women easily dig ditches through snow and ice. Clearly, continuous heavy agricultural work cannot easily be combined with childcare or housework. The distinction between productive labor, especially heavy labor, and childcare and household tasks is further emphasized in the system of remuneration: in Ta-chai, women who return home to do household tasks, and nursing women, are given third-class (the lowest) labor points -- in other communes they do not receive any labor points at all -- in contrast the most arduous and skilled labor by women receive first-class labor points.

3) For these women the strict division of labor by age and sex does not apply, and the activist women are "assimilated" into male roles in the community.[6] Women recalled that in 1963, "Fighting alongside the male commune members, we girls worked tirelessly ... We girls advanced the slogan, 'The weather is cold, but it cannot make our warm hearts cold. The earth is cold, but it cannot freeze our determination. The icy wind blows, but it cannot shake our confidence!'" In this brigade men and women are equal insofar as they are both engaged in arduous productive labor. Their labor force participation gives the women some say in political activities, formerly the monopoly of men, and the opinions of Ta-chai ironside girls on the Cultural Revolution and the current political movement against Lin Piao and Confuciansim are frequently quoted in the national press. Women are a particularly high proportion of the Communist Party and Young Communist League branches in Ta-chai, compared with women elsewhere, which is attributable to their active role in production. Great pressure is exerted on women to join the labor force and work at difficult tasks. A single women deviant with poor work performance threatens collective solidarity,[7] and Women's Association cadres seek out the incompetent and reluctant workers and encourage them to work harder. Now that Ta-chai has become a national model, visited by thousands of both peasants and foreign tourists a year (and with its own hotel facilities!), it has an international reputation which further intensifies pressure for all to maintain high standards of performance.

4) Over half of the current "iron sides girls" have graduated from senior middle school, (a relatively high proportion for rural China) and it can be expected that their enthusiasm for labor force participation was fanned by the political emphasis in the contemporary educational system. They did not learn the agricultural tasks in school, but got their skills from short term training courses which ramify through the countryside, supplementing the formal education system and providing an alternative to family training in agricultural techniques.

Little attention is given to increasing individual consumer goods tastes in Ta-chai, but the collective standard of living has risen by virtue of the community's hard labor. The ideology of "sacrifice for the community in the war against nature" conveys the message that families should be frugal, and families plow back "voluntarily" any surplus and profit at the year's end to the collective. In return, the collective paternalistically cares for them, and after another severe flood the brigade rebuilt the homes of 80% of its members. "Regard the collective's work as your own" is the call, while the needs of the individual families are emphasized.

5) Although work organization has changed, family norms have lagged behind, and the very unevenness of change has anti-natalist implications. The "ironsides girls" are highly motivated to delay marriage. Marriage is still exogamous, and by marrying out of the village in which they were production leaders, they must renounce their positions of honor and prestige. These positions are based on intimate knowledge of local farming conditions, terrain, and village personalities, knowledge that cannot be easily transferred elsewhere. "Ironsides" girls are "setting examples by marrying late" precisely because they don't want to leave Ta-chai too early. They are expected to set a work example in the village in which they are to live after marriage (one article notes: "When an iron girl goes to her husband's house, she carries a shoulder pole and two baskets, and brings with her only a set of "Selected Works of Mao-Tse-tung, and no other dowry"), but she will still be an outsider in that village. Those in Ta-chai who are already married, and are involved in strenuous labor are highly motivated to reduce their fertility to remain in the labor force. In contrast to other women workers, they are members of a special team, are committed to their work, and to their co-workers, and do not consider themselves replaceable. Hence, children would necessarily compete with the labor force participation that alone carries honor and prestige.[8]

6) The Ta-chai women are highly motivated to limit their family size, and those who bear numerous children are not only seen as old fashioned, but must give up the very roles that bear honor in the community. They have access to contraceptive implements as well, and the Women's Association publicizes contraception by knocking at every door, and talking to young mothers. It has been emphasized in this paper however, that the structural constraints on these young activist women support their desire to delay marriage and reduce fertility. There are at present competing models of "the woman's place" in China, and the Ta-chai women who must prove their revolutionary ardor by taking men's roles cannot at the same time be traditional mothers. Hence, it can be expected that they are reducing their fertility below the levels of other village women.

Implications for future research:

The Ta-chai ironsides women are a minority even in Ta-chai, and in itself this minority status reinforces their desire to reduce fertility to retain leadership positions. My future research will next investigate the presence of such leadership groups in other Chinese communities, and the family-building styles of women who desire to be leaders, as contrasted with those who do not. Still other research being carried out by Professor Mary Sheridan of York University traces the ways that the communities learn from Ta-chai, and the networks of influence Ta-chai has elsewhere in rural China.

Footnotes

1. John L. Buck and associates carried out a large-scale survey in rural China in 1923, and found the average number of children born alive for married women aged 45 or older was 5.29 children. Land Utilization in China (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1968), p. 385. Not all these children survived, however, and in some rural communities the infant mortality rate was almost 300 per 1,000 live births.

2. The following discussion of the conflict between occupational and family demands draws on the framework in Rose L. Coser and G. Rokoff, "Women in the Occupational World: Social Disruption and Conflict", Social Problems (Spring 1971), pp. 535-54.

3. A large-scale survey in Hupeh province in 1959 found that rural women married for twenty-five years had on the average borne two children more than their urban counterparts. Hence, rural-urban fertility differentials already existed on the eve of the Chinese revolution. "Hu-pei sheng 22,251 Ch'eng-hsiang fu-nu yueh-ching chi sheng-yu ch'ing kuang t'iao-ch'a fen-hsi," (Investigation and analysis of the childbirtn and menstrual conditions of 22,251 rural and urban Hupeh women), Chung-hua fu-ch'an-k'o tsa-chih (Chinese Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology) no. 8 (1960), pp. 5-11.

4. Numerous articles on Ta-chai have appeared in the Chinese press over the past ten years, and many Western visitors have been taken to this brigade as well. The main articles used here are: "The Unique Wage System of the Tachai Brigade", Union Research Service, 49:16 (November 24, 1967), pp. 212-225; Sung Li-ying, "T'u-ch'u cheng-chih, yin-tao fu-nu sze-hsiang ke-ming-hua" (Thrust politics forward, lead women to revolutionize their thoughts), Chung-hua fu-nu (China's Women), March 1966, pp. 12-16; "All Women in Our Village Emulate Ta-chai", Chung-hua fu-nu, November 1, 1965; "We Revolutionary Women Bitterly Hate the Doctrines of Confucius and Mencius", by the Iron Girls Team of Ta-chai Brigade", Hung-ch'i, March 3, 1974. (Red Flag) translated in Survey of China Mainland Magazines, 771, pp. 36-83.

5. These surveys are reprinted in Hsin-hua pan-yueh k'an (New China semi-monthly), no. 8 (September 1958), pp. 94-98, and have also been analyzed by Peter Schran, The Structure of Income in Communist China (Berkeley: University of California, Department of Economics, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1961), pp. 195-6.

6. Alice Rossi has argued that the assimilation model of society which requires women to take up men's job can apply to only a minority of women, and that it does not account for those men who wish to alter their stereotyped roles, and adopt more "female" roles. "Sex Equality: The Beginnings of Ideology", Humanist (September-October, 1969). The Chinese do not currently advocate that men take on child care tasks, however occasional articles in the press stress that household tasks be shared equally between husband and wife; "Liberation from the Burden of Home Chores", Yang-ch'eng wan-pao (Canton evening post), March 1,

1965, p. 3. This, however, is different from Rossi's notion that men can become more nurturant and less work oriented, a notion that would find little receptivity in China given the present efforts to industrialize using labor intensive methods.

7. The "commitment mechanisms" that cement collective solidarity in utopian collectives have been analyzed by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Commitment and Social Organization: A Study of Commitment Mechanisms in Utopian Communities", American Sociological Review 33:4 (August 1968), pp. 499-515.

8. The Tachai emphasis on equality through heavy labor for the community is reminiscent of the early kibbutzim experiments. M. Spiro, Venture in Utopia (New York: Schocken, 1964), p. 224, and work in progress, Dr. Rae L. Blumberg, Department of Sociology, University of California at San Diego.